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**Beyond sociology and linguistics:
the social construction of literacy in a didactic perspective**

Reading in the LAS-report in a didactic perspective, I had the strong feeling that the findings of this „thick description“ (in the very meaning of Clifford Geertz) are an important contribution to review and to rethink the patterns of thinking and acting in the field of literacy acquisition in schools, and doing this by triangulation. For, as the references show, the LAS-study is actually done „from abroad“ – that is in external perspectives, those of sociology and linguistics.

However, albeit not in the mainstream of my profession, there do exist comparative studies in standard language teaching (above all in the framework of IMEN¹), and relying on them, I should like to make some additional remarks.

So, I have to point out the discussions on methodological possibilities and problems of doing qualitative comparative studies. The main issues considered are:

- how to do case studies (cf. Ball 1991) and how to do comparisons (cf. Sturm 1991);
- how to detect and to understand external and internal boundaries in the subject matter structure of standard language teaching (cf. Herrlitz 1987);
- how to detect and to understand the metonymic structure of classroom interactions in standard language teaching as to the culture and the styles of teaching, i.e. the habitualised costumes in this subject matter area (cf. Herrlitz 1994)

It seems to me that especially the latter two points are of importance with regard to the LAS-study. Following Herrlitz, the scheme for analysing the metonymic structure is shaped like a floating iceberg. This means that only a small part of that what is going on in classroom interactions is immediately observable (the tips of the bergs), whereas the underlying structures are to be reconstructed.

¹ cf. Ball (1999), Haueis/Kroon/ van de Ven eds. (1999), Herrlitz (1987) und (1994), Sturm (1991)

However, the different levels are interconnected. Thus, analysing the development of themes in the course of a lesson and the way of referring to elements of the conveyed knowledge and to make assertions, does not only lead to assumptions about the teacher's conception of teaching and learning, but also to assumptions about the social construction of the contents of teaching.

Hence, comparative studies on literacy acquisition in schools should include the question, if there are hints to different social constructions of literacy. There may be big differences between relevant conceptual constructions by scholars on the one hand, and constructions within the educational system and among parents on the other hand (for an ethnographic approach to the concepts and practices of literacy in two local working class communities cf. Heath 1983). Those differences might be described in terms of relations between scribal and literate aspects of literacy. The LAS-report refers to most of those issues, but rather implicitly than explicitly.

As to the literate aspects of language use, the LAS-research refers to them either in looking for linguistic markers or in terms of „further literacy“ after first reading and writing instructions. In this way, the LAS-study is following the tradition of a rigid separation between the „secretary use“ of writing and reading for the one hand, and the „authors“ use of written language. Yet, from the beginning of vernacular education up to now, the linguistic distinction between those two aspects of literacy was also treated as a social distinction, manifested even in the teaching methods in primary schools for the lower classes (cf. Gessinger 1980): their main principle of „spoon feeding“ relies on splitting up the whole content into small teaching units, isolating them and bringing them in a fixed order. (Gessinger: parzellieren, isolieren, sequenzieren)

Remarkably, these features of a socially and pedagogically restricted approach to literacy may clearly be observed in the Turkish classes. At first glance, the approach to literacy in the German classes seems to be quite opposite. Indeed, even with the first-graders, the teaching of writing and reading is geared toward

texts and contexts. But the parental acquaintance with this aspect of literacy seems to be taken for granted by the teachers, and many of necessary reading exercises are „outsourced“. Moreover, the sound-driven first approach to reading and writing turns out to be rather inappropriate and misleading with regard to the German language. Thus, we might recognize a social bias in the literacy education of the German classes, too. It is, however, a hidden bias – which is not to be observed on „the tip of the iceberg“.

By the way, the „sequency strategy“ invented and applied by the Turkish first-grade teacher is quite similar to the traditional letter-driven approach to reading. That is, the pupils had to learn by rote the sound-patterns of syllables to read out as the result of an addition of letters (and not by combining the „sounds“): the letter , named [bi:] , followed by the letter <a>, named [eⁱ], sounds [ba] – and so on. Here again, we may consider the social construction of teaching contents. But this is another story...

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